



SOFTWARE

FAQ

Q Please can you explain how encryption works?

A Encryption turns your files into gibberish so that nobody else can read them. It uses an encryption key, which tells your PC how to convert the text into its encrypted form and how to restore it again. At its most basic, encryption involves a single key, and anybody who has that key can read your encrypted documents and create encrypted documents that you can read.

A more complicated type of encryption, called Public Key Infrastructure (PKI), uses two keys. One key encrypts your data, but only the other can decrypt it, and vice versa. You give your public key out and keep your private key to yourself. As everybody has access to the public key, they can use it to send you encrypted messages that only you can read with your private key. You can also use your public key to encrypt data and files, safe in the knowledge that only your hidden private key can decode them.

Encryption levels are usually referred to in bits, such as 128-bit or 256-bit. The higher the number, the harder the encryption is to break.

Encryption software also uses an algorithm to encode files. Strong and respected options include Triple DES, AES and Blowfish. AES is the industry standard, but Triple DES is also common.

Q I want to change my web browser to Firefox or Opera, but I've heard that not all sites work with them. Why is that?

A The internet is supposed to be based on open standards, but some websites are written to take advantage of extra features in Internet Explorer. Sadly, this means that when other browsers try to access the site, they render it incorrectly and you end up with misplaced text or buttons that don't work. These sites are generally not World Wide Web Consortium (www.w3c.com) compatible. You can use the W3C website's HTML

Validator to verify your website. Developers are increasingly catering for other browsers, though, and Firefox in particular works most of the time.

Another problem is the use of scripting languages, such as ActiveX. Firefox doesn't support this, as it's a common way for spyware and malicious code to attack your PC. This means Firefox doesn't work with any ActiveX websites, which include many banking sites.

We recommend that you use Firefox for general day-to-day web browsing and switch to Internet Explorer for sites that require it.

david@computershopper.co.uk



Use the W3C's HTML Validator to check a website's compliance

REVIEW VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

ADOBE
Premiere Elements 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £63 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

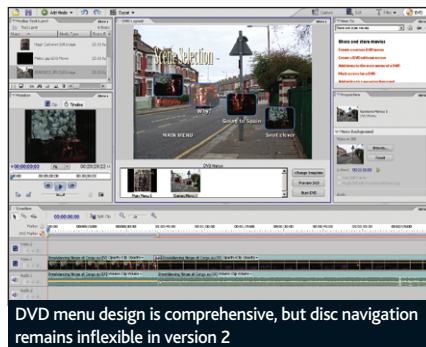
It took Adobe a long time to release a low-cost video-editing program, but with Premiere Elements the company got it right first time. It changed little from the heavyweight application Premiere Pro, producing by far the most powerful video-editing software aimed at home users.

Unlimited tracks meant that video, still image and audio elements could be layered in ways other low-cost editors couldn't hope to achieve, while object motion and effects settings benefited from comprehensive key frame-based automation, allowing the user to morph settings over time with incredible levels of precision. Premiere Pro isn't the easiest program to get to grips with, but Premiere Elements added some welcome signposting to help new users find their way.

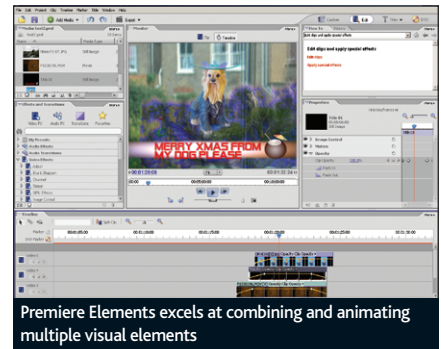
One of these signposts was a series of buttons that ran along the top of the screen labelled Capture, Edit, Effects, Titles, DVD and Export. Clicking these buttons rearranged the windows onscreen, bringing all the necessary controls for a particular task to the foreground. Best of all, you could customise each screen layout to your liking, giving the timeline more space in Edit mode or making the Monitor window larger in Titles mode.

The most obvious difference in Premiere Elements 2 is that its windows are docked together, so expanding one automatically contracts those beside it. You can also dock windows over each other and access them through a series of tabs. This makes the screen feel slightly less cramped, although it still looks busy. One disappointment is that the Effects and Export buttons have disappeared. We found it useful to switch between Edit and Effects modes, so it seems strange that we're no longer allowed to do so.

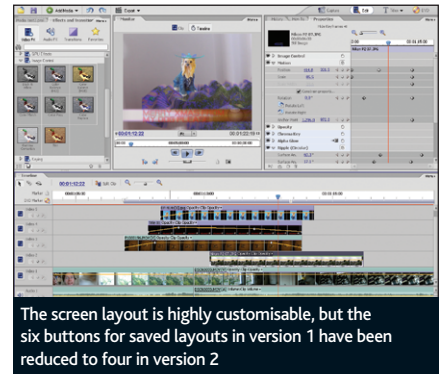
The one area where Premiere Elements lagged behind competitors was in its DVD authoring, which consisted of picking a template and changing the text. In version 2, it's possible to rearrange the layout of menu buttons, reformat text and use your own background image, video or music in menus. This is great news for those who are put off by the cheesy templates, but it's still not possible to personalise the menu navigation layout, which ambitious users may find limiting. DVDs can be encoded with stereo Dolby Digital audio, which



DVD menu design is comprehensive, but disc navigation remains inflexible in version 2



Premiere Elements excels at combining and animating multiple visual elements



The screen layout is highly customisable, but the six buttons for saved layouts in version 1 have been reduced to four in version 2

uses less space than PCM audio and frees up room for more or higher-quality video.

SUPPORTING ROLE

Premiere Elements is now less fussy about video and audio formats. We imported footage from a wide variety of digital cameras and even from unencrypted DVDs. However, there's no HDV support, which is a shame now that HDV cameras are within reach of home users. Other new features make the software easier or faster to use, such as a Split Clip button, opacity and volume fade in/out buttons and thumbnails that show what effects do before you apply them. But in places Premiere Elements is an uphill struggle for new users. Many effects present their settings as a list of jargon and numbers. And while having dedicated key frame tracks for each parameter gives tremendous precision, casual users may find it baffling.

Premiere Elements 2 isn't a huge improvement over its predecessor, but it's a welcome one. However, its main rival, Sony Vegas Movie Studio, is easier for beginners and faster for experienced users. For example, overlapping two clips in Movie Studio puts a dissolve transition between them, but doing the same thing in Premiere Elements chops off the end of the first clip and puts it after the second clip, which seems pointless. Given the recent power boost Movie Studio 6 has received, along with HDV support in the Platinum Edition, Sony's programs are our top choice for inexpensive video editing. But if complex animated video collages are your thing, Premiere Elements is the only low-cost option.

Ben Pitt



Incredible power for the price; improved DVD authoring



Confusing in places, clumsy in others

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP SP2, processor with SSE2 (Pentium 4/M/D, Opteron or Athlon 64), 256MB RAM, 4GB disk space, DVD drive.
Product code 25530217



REVIEW INTERNET SECURITY SOFTWARE

STEGANOS

Internet Security 2006

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £35 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Steganos 00800 78342667

DETAILS www.steganos.co.uk

Steganos's Internet Security suite is a comprehensive bundle of utilities that aims to protect your computer against the main threats on the internet. These include viruses, hackers, spyware and spam. For just £35 including VAT, this seems like an attractive deal.

The suite is a collection of separate utilities rather than an integrated program. The installation CD allows you to install each component separately, which is handy if you already have an anti-spam program you're happy with, for example, as you can ignore the one Steganos provides. Steganos's modular approach reflects the fact that the company has not written all the individual programs itself but has licensed them from other developers.

This is no bad thing, because Steganos has picked some seriously useful programs. The anti-virus software is a loosely rebranded version of Kaspersky Lab's Anti-Virus Personal. This is an excellent product and our standalone anti-virus program of choice. Our previous reservations were down to cost, as this particular program is £28. This means you pay just £7 for the rest of the programs, which makes this suite a real bargain.

The personal firewall, also known as Kaspersky Anti-Hacker, is another of our favourites. It is also worth £28 including VAT as a standalone product. Both Anti-Virus and Anti-Hacker are easy to use. The anti-virus program has unbeatable detection rates, matched only by F-Secure Anti-Virus, which also uses Kaspersky technology.

Spyware is a relatively new threat that wreaks havoc on vast numbers of Windows PCs, as we at *Shopper* know only too well from the number of spyware-related cries for help we receive. Steganos AntiSpyware 2006 is actually Webroot's Spy Sweeper, which usually costs around £25 including VAT. It scans systems for spyware and protects your browser against malignant Browser Helper Objects (BHOs), which are often used to hijack Internet Explorer. If you've been unable to change your browser's default homepage, your system is probably infected with a bad BHO.

Spy Sweeper is a competent product, although it barely got a chance to prove itself in our tests as the anti-virus program picked up anything nasty that tried to run automatically. It didn't interfere with any legitimate BHOs we installed, either.

The anti-spam program contains every option you are likely to want to combat unsolicited commercial email. The basics are all there, including the ability to allow and block particular email addresses and domains. You can also import your Windows address book. It supports plug-in filters, so it can block attached files with specified file extensions, emails that contain images hosted on web servers and email that external anti-spam databases have classified as spam. You can also



Steganos Personal Firewall is a rebranded version of the excellent Kaspersky Anti-Hacker and is worth £28 in its own right

permit newsletters that might otherwise be sent to the program's recycle bin.

This package is a bargain. Even if you are happy with your current anti-spam program or don't want to change your firewall, this is still a good deal. After the first year you'll need to buy a subscription for further updates, but this is only £20 including VAT, a fraction of the cost you would face if you owned each program separately.

Simon Edwards

✓ Top-class products at bargain basement prices

✗ Programs are not integrated

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM (256MB recommended), 100MB disk space

HOTLIST OFFICE SUITE

ABILITY SOFTWARE

Ability Office 4

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Professional Edition £50 inc VAT (upgrade £25); Standard/Small Business Edition £40 inc VAT (upgrade £20)

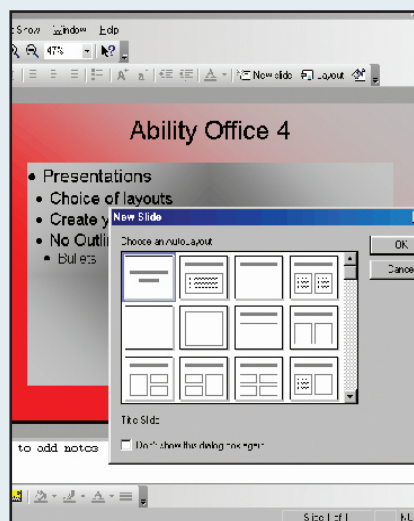
DETAILS www.ability.com

Buying an office suite doesn't necessarily mean spending a lot of money, as Ability shows us with its Office 4 suite. For just £50 for the Professional Edition, it undercuts the competition by a mile but still offers a functional package.

The latest version introduces the new Presentation program, which competes against Microsoft's PowerPoint. It's compatible with its competitor, bar a couple of features such as embedded video. This means that a few PowerPoint presentations won't open properly in Ability and you'll have to start your work from scratch. To facilitate this, Ability offers 20 slide layouts for slideshows.

The other big feature is Ability Mail. It's not included on the CD, but is available as a free download from the Ability website for registered users. It's the final piece in the puzzle for moving away from a Microsoft-based productivity suite.

Ability Office 4 also updates Ability Database. One of the strengths of the suite, the database



now provides easier form design and reporting. Ability Write has the welcome additions of Autocorrect, Autotext and Grammar Checker. These features put the application on a par with Microsoft Word.

For the price it's very good value, although we recommend downloading the trial version to make sure all the features you need are present.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 100MB disk space

HOTLIST VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

SONY

Vegas Movie Studio

+DVD Platinum Edition 6



RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £99 inc VAT

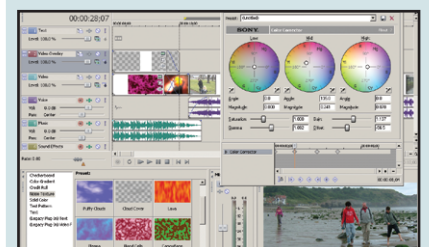
SUPPLIER SCV London 020 8418 1470

DETAILS www.sonymediasoftware.com

Platinum Edition is new to the Vegas family and adds support for High-Definition Video (HDV) cameras. With a range of new effects over the standard edition, including the excellent Colour Corrector, it's well worth the extra £15.

Movie Studio has finally caught up and even surpassed its rival, Adobe's Premiere Elements.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 200MB disk space. Product code SPVMSDV6000





REVIEW ENCRYPTION SOFTWARE

DATA ENCRYPTION SYSTEMS
DESlock+ 3.2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £118 inc VAT

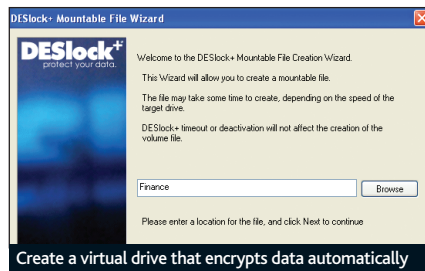
SUPPLIER www.des.co.ukDETAILS www.deslock.com

Anyone with access to your PC can copy and read your data, and simply password-protecting your Word documents isn't very secure. DESlock+ offers a more effective way of protecting your data using encryption (see our FAQ on page 52).

The software stores your encryption key securely on a USB flash drive. Without this USB key connected, you can't view your encrypted files. Obviously, this could lead to problems if you were to lose the USB key, so DESlock+ comes with two in the box so that you can create a backup.

It's tricky to get working and the manual can be difficult to understand. We followed the steps for creating and activating a new key but couldn't back it up on to the second USB key. We had to activate that key first before the backup operation would work. The manual could do with a slightly clearer step-by-step guide that dictates every action to make it obvious what you should do.

You'll probably use the software through its Windows integration. Right-clicking a file or folder lets you archive the data (like an encrypted Zip file) or encrypt it directly. The latter option works on



folders, so any file you copy into it is encrypted automatically. With your USB key inserted you can access these files and folders as you would any others; remove it, though, and you're denied access. For further protection, DESlock+ can hide encrypted files when your key isn't available.

This worked seamlessly on our test PC, but there was one complication: choosing the encryption key. Each USB key can hold multiple encryption keys, and when you encrypt a file the software asks you to choose one. This is probably a bit much for most people. A simple mode that uses a default option would have been better. Power users and those who understand encryption well will be pleased to see the full range of options.

There's also the problem of emailing archives to people, as they need to be able to decrypt the file using their copy of DESlock+. The software has built-in key requests, but if this sounds complex you can encrypt archives using a less-secure password. As well as encrypting files and folders DESlock+ can create encrypted volumes, which appear as drives in Windows. This requires a separate application, which you can open from the Start menu. It's worth doing, because you'll know that everything



you save to that drive is securely encrypted, and it provides a single place to store your secure files.

There's also a secure scratch pad, which saves data you type securely. It would have been nice to have a built-in password vault as well, though. DESlock+ could also do with better integration between its applications, or at least a start application that launches programs by task – such as an 'I want to create a secure drive' link that launches the encrypted drive utility.

Aside from that, DESlock+ does everything you want an encryption program to do, and it does it well. If you transfer a lot of documents to other people, the key exchange tools are invaluable. We wish there was an easier mode for the less technically inclined, though.

David Ludlow



Large range of tools; secure drives work well



Can be complex to use; needs better integration between its applications

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 300MHz processor, 64MB memory, USB port

HOTLIST ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE

F-SECURE
Anti-Virus 2005

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £26 inc VAT

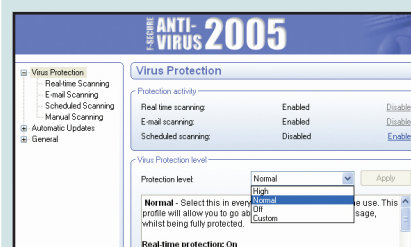
SUPPLIER F-Secure 01223 478800

DETAILS www.f-secure.com

One of the cheapest anti-virus products on the market, F-Secure's Anti-Virus is also one of the best. Its interface is clean and easy to use, and when we downloaded infected emails its pop-up listed the viruses but didn't halt the rest of the download.

With excellent detection across the board, it's great value for money and worthy of our Best Buy award.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM, 30MB disk space



HOTLIST PC RECOVERY

INVOLUTION
RecoverPC

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £100 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.hacyonics.co.ukDETAILS www.recoverpc.com

When your PC goes catastrophically wrong and you can't even start Windows, RecoverPC can help. This PCI card fits into a free slot and lets you access a hidden partition. A few seconds later, you'll be able to restore your PC to a working state.

It's amazingly quick, works really well and is good value. But make sure you back up your documents regularly or they'll be overwritten.

REQUIREMENTS Free PCI slot. Product code 5060094150000



HOTLIST MUSIC PRODUCTION SOFTWARE

ABLETON
Live 5

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £299 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dv247.comDETAILS www.ableton.com

Ableton Live is an extraordinary piece of software, designed to help you produce your live performance. Its excellent Session View lets you trigger recorded clips on the fly, making the software more of an instrument than a recording platform. If you plan to perform on stage, there's no better choice than Live.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 600MHz processor, 512MB RAM. Product code 28683





REVIEW VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

PINNACLE
Studio Plus 10

RATING ★★

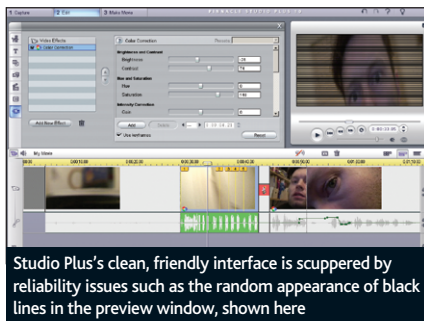
PRICE £58 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.savastore.comDETAILS www.pinnaclestys.com

Pinnacle Studio is one of the best-known video-editing programs for home users. Cut-down versions are bundled with new PCs and the full version is often included with Pinnacle's capture hardware. Studio Plus 10 is the first new release since Pinnacle became part of Avid, the dominant firm in broadcast-level video editing, but it appears to be business as usual for this low-cost editor.

Version 10's highlight is its support for HDV cameras, such as Sony's HDR-HC1 (see *What's New, Shopper* January 2006). Capturing HDV is as easy as capturing from MiniDV cameras. However, Studio Plus saves footage as an .m2v file for the MPEG2 video and a separate .wav for the audio, which may hinder imports into other applications.

The software handles HDV editing superbly, with much smoother previews than Sony Vegas Movie Studio Platinum can manage. A button switches to instant full-screen previews but, disappointingly, the preview appears to be limited to PAL resolution. You need to export HD projects to see them in all their glory. You can render them in MPEG2 and WMV formats, although we found that many players couldn't play the exported files correctly. When outputting to WMV, you have the



Studio Plus's clean, friendly interface is scuppered by reliability issues such as the random appearance of black lines in the preview window, shown here

option of adding surround sound, and surround panning is surprisingly easy to achieve, but creating DVDs with surround sound requires a £6 upgrade.

Studio 9's effects were hampered by an inability to morph settings over time other than using fade-in and fade-out points. Version 10 has addressed this with key frames: choose effects settings for various points in a clip, and the software morphs between these settings for the frames in between. You can add, delete and move key frames.

Studio Plus 10 includes a program called Instant DVD Recorder. This burns footage from an external source straight to DVD Video disc, but it failed in our tests. In our first attempt, it started writing and then decided it didn't like our HDV camera as a source, wasting a blank disc. Using a MiniDV camera it worked for a minute, but then it started dropping more frames than it captured, omitting large sections of the tape and reducing our 10-minute footage to less than two minutes.

Sadly, this wasn't the only part of the software we found unreliable. As with previous versions, the main editing program suffered more than its fair



Instant DVD recorder turns video tapes into DVD Video discs; sadly, it proved unreliable in our tests

share of errors and crashes while performing a variety of tasks. Video-editing programs are often less reliable than other types of software, but Studio remains one of the worst in our experience.

Studio Plus can't compete with Adobe Premiere Elements 2 (see page 52) or Sony Vegas Movie Studio (What's New, Shopper December 2005) in terms of editing power. It's more approachable, with its option of a storyboard-style clip compiler and clean interface. However, this friendly approach is squandered by the reliability problems, making it frustrating to use.

Ben Pitt



HDV support; key frame automation on effects



Lots of crashes and errors in our tests

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 1.4GHz processor, 512MB RAM (2.8GHz, 1GB recommended), 32MB DirectX 9 graphics (128MB for 720p HD, 256MB for 1080i HD), 4GB disk space, DVD drive.

Product code 202262220

HOTLIST MEDIA SUITES

ROXIO
Easy Media
Creator 8 Suite

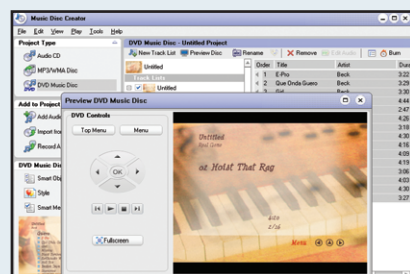
RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £47 inc VAT

SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>DETAILS www.roxio.co.uk

After playing second fiddle to Nero, Roxio's Easy Media Creator has reclaimed its place as our favourite media suite. Its comprehensive range of applications covers everything from creating and managing your media to burning it to disc. This is an excellent application, and great value.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP/SP2, 1.6GHz processor for all features, 256MB RAM, 1GB disk space, DirectX 9 graphics card. **Product code** 223300UK



HOTLIST WEB DESIGN SOFTWARE

MACROMEDIA
Dreamweaver 8

RATING ★★★★★

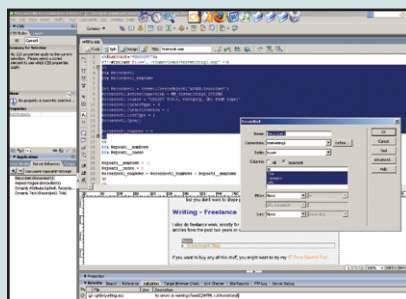
PRICE £400 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Macromedia Direct 0131 458 6766

DETAILS www.macromedia.com

If you have anything to do with developing professional websites, Dreamweaver 8 is the best £400 you'll ever spend. Miles ahead of the competition, it has everything. Whether you design the look of a site or incorporate dynamic data, Dreamweaver has the tools you need. It's too expensive for the home user, though.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 650MB disk space, 1,024x768-pixel display



HOTLIST HOSTING PACKAGE

1AND1
Microsoft Home

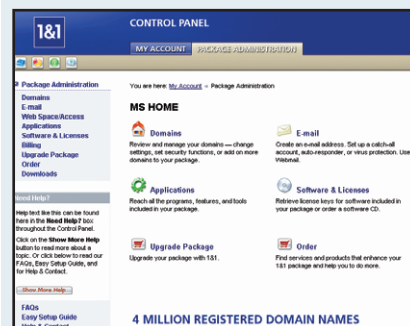
RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £5.86 per month, £70 a year

DETAILS www.1and1.co.uk

If you want to run a website above and beyond the simple web space that you get with your ISP, you'll need a dedicated hosting package such as 1and1's Microsoft Home. You get 800MB of web space, 10GB of data transfers a month, a free .co.uk domain name and 300 email addresses. This web hosting pack, with its simple control panel and bundled scripts, is excellent value.

REQUIREMENTS Internet access, web browser





REVIEW INTERNET TELEPHONY SOFTWARE

SWYX
SwyxWare 5.10

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £1,224 inc VAT for five-user licence
with two voice channels

SUPPLIER Swyx 0118 325 0110

DETAILS www.swyx.com

Setting up a telephone system for a small business can be a real pain. With SwyxWare, you can turn an ordinary PC into a private branch exchange (PBX), giving employees voicemail facilities, call diverting, extension transfers and all the other benefits of a PBX system.

According to Swyx the software requires a Windows 2000 or 2003 server, but you can actually install it on a Windows XP PC, which could be the preferred method for small installations. The program uses a SQL database, which sounds as if it might be a pain to configure, but the automated installer takes care of the hard work. You just need to click Next until the installer has finished the job.

Once the software is installed, you use a single management application called Swyx Administration to configure your server. This is surprisingly easy to use, and the default settings will suit most companies. It integrates with your existing Windows domain, so you can configure it to give your users new Swyx telephone extensions. Most settings are based on the defaults, so each user starts off with a default voicemail message, which they can change later. The software can also

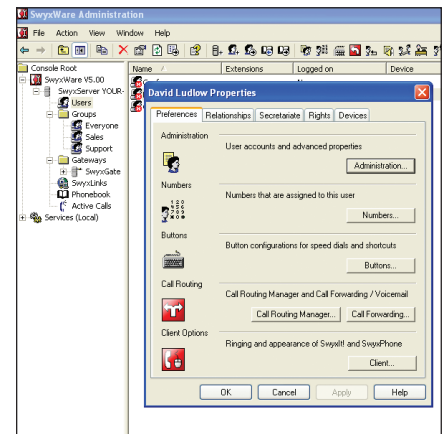
allocate their extension number automatically by giving them the next free one. You can use the default extension numbers or change them to match an external system.

You need to choose the method by which users log in. The default selection is SwyxIt!. This application uses the PC to communicate. It has advanced call routing options and online indicators for other telephone users, and it integrates with Outlook. However, you can use standard VoIP telephones or SIP clients if you prefer. At this point you may need some help configuring the system.

SwyxWare comes with a licence for SwyxGate, which lets you interface your system with an existing telephone network, such as BT. Swyx sells analogue and ISDN interface adaptors, which must be installed in the server to make the interchange. This lets your users dial external numbers from their internal phone.

One advantage of using a digital PBX such as this is the ability to use the internet to make phone calls. SwyxWare 5.10 supports SIP trunks, which handle this connection. These route internet calls across the internet for free, or very cheaply. Calls to standard phones are routed to the nearest exchange where they join the local telephone network. This cuts call costs down to a fraction.

Unfortunately, the documentation that explains how to do this is appalling. If you search for SIP using the online documentation or the downloadable PDF, you don't get a single hit. We eventually found help in the Swyx Knowledge Base, and discovered that you have to create a SwyxLink. It's not that hard to do and it comes with some built-in service providers, but you must make sure you get the correct details from your provider. You



SwyxWare integrates with your existing Windows Domain, making your phone system easier to set up

can also use SwyxLink to connect two servers in different offices for free phone calls.

This is a cheap way of adding a professional telephony system to any small business, although the documentation needs to be improved to make it easier to configure. Once you get it working, however, it's easy to use and should keep the cost of your calls down.

David Ludlow

✓ High-end PBX at a reasonable cost; integrates with VoIP services

✗ SIP links are hidden away

REQUIREMENTS Windows Server 2000 or 2003, 800MHz Pentium III processor, 512MB RAM, 50MB disk space

HOTLIST REMOTE CONTROL SOFTWARE

3AM LABS
LogMeIn

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free; Professional edition

\$13 (around £7) per month

SUPPLIER www.3amlabs.com

DETAILS www.logmein.com

If you have ever needed to access your PC while you've been away, LogMeIn is just the software for you. The free version gives you full remote control of your PC over the internet and works brilliantly.

The Professional version adds support for file transfers and guest invitations, and lets you use email to send links to files on your PC. It's an excellent piece of software for anyone who does a lot of remote work.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Internet Explorer, broadband internet connection



HOTLIST WEB BROWSER

MOZILLA
Firefox 1.0

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

SUPPLIER www.firefox.com

Firefox 1.0 is by far the best web browser we've ever used. Introducing advanced features such as tabbed browsing and support for RSS feeds, it is leaps and bounds ahead of Internet Explorer. When you also consider that it's better at rendering pages and is free, there's little excuse not to use it.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 500MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 52MB disk space



HOTLIST PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE

ADOBE
Photoshop Elements 4.0

RATING ★★★★★

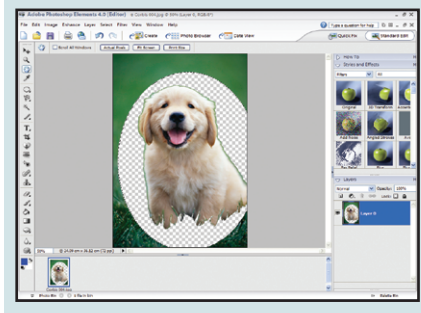
PRICE £68 inc VAT; upgrade £58

SUPPLIER www.microanvika.com

DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

The latest version of Photoshop Elements blows the competition away. It has stunning new organisation features, including the ability to search for photos that contain people's faces. With the best range of editing features on the market and a low price, this program is one for all photo-editing enthusiasts.

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 800MB disk space. Product code AD07071A





REVIEW WEB BROWSER

OPERA SOFTWARE

Opera 8.5

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free 4MB download

SUPPLIER www.opera.com

Opera is one of the most popular alternatives to Microsoft's Internet Explorer web browser. The main innovation in version 8.5 is the way it's licensed. Until now, Opera has used embedded advertising banners to pay the bills, which were removed only when the user registered their copy. Now there is no registration, no prompts and, best of all, no ads.

Tabbed browsing makes it easy to keep track of your browsing sessions, while keyboard short cuts streamline your online movements. A mouse gesture system increases browsing speed further, letting you activate navigation and menu functions by holding the right button and moving the mouse. Accidentally closed tabs can be re-opened from the recycle bin and sessions are saved automatically when you exit. Opera includes a fully integrated POP3 email client and support for RSS news feeds.

For the security conscious, Opera classifies the encryption level of secure sites and delivers detailed information on any certificates a site holds. An automatic password manager makes logging into your favourite sites more efficient, but you can deactivate this if you're worried about security. At any time during a session you can remove all your data, including passwords, history, cookies and cache from the browser with a single click.

Opera doesn't always display sites properly – more often on complex sites that use DHTML and CSS. This can be infuriating if you complete an online application form only to find the submit button inactive or missing. The blame often lies with website designers who haven't stuck to W3C development rules, but that's little consolation if you have to return to Internet Explorer to proceed. Firefox faces the same problem, but its popularity has ensured that website developers check site compatibility, and we rarely run into trouble now.

Opera is efficient, fast and friendly, and a far more attractive proposition now that it's free. However, Firefox is still our favourite browser, as it's more reliable.

David McKinnon

✓ Fast, efficient web browsing; gestures make it easy to navigate the web; tabbed browsing

✗ Doesn't render all sites properly

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95 or above



Tabbed browsing, keyboard short cuts and mouse gesture controls make Opera a good alternative to IE

REVIEW MUSIC SOFTWARE

APPLE

iTunes 6.0.1

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.itunes.com

Now in its sixth version, Apple's iTunes is no longer limited to music. Apple has teamed up with TV studios in the US to offer episodes of TV shows for download. Sadly, there is no similar agreement in the UK, so the video selection in the UK's iTunes Music Store is limited to several thousand music videos and a handful of short Pixar animations. These cost a reasonable £1.89 each, and any future TV shows are expected to cost a similar amount per episode.

The video download section fits snugly within the existing music store. Downloads are in MPEG4 format and detailed enough for playback up to 640x480. This is not as detail-rich as DVD, but it strikes a good balance between download time and price. Playback performance in iTunes isn't as smooth as we'd like, though, with glitchy and distracting frame loss. It can't convert unsupported video formats, either, unless you buy an upgrade to QuickTime Pro.

While the video function is a small step in an interesting direction, iTunes' main function is as a music player, and here it excels. The Apple Mac-influenced interface is a pleasure to use and enables you to build playlists, rip CDs and burn compilations to CD without having to read a manual. It's also a breeze to manage your music library and stream music to other computers or a stereo using Apple's wireless AirPort Express. File support in iTunes includes Apple's proprietary AAC as well as MP3, WAV and AIFF lossless. There is still no support for WMA files, although iTunes can convert them to a supported format.

You can synchronise your music with an iPod and copy video to the new video iPod, but for users of other players, iTunes isn't very useful.

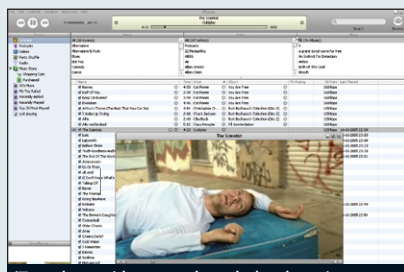
While other players such as Microsoft's Media Player 10 offer a more comprehensive media package with better video support, iTunes 6.0.1 is the best desktop music player.

David McKinnon

✓ Unparalleled music player, organiser and ripper

✗ Video use is still limited; less effective for non-iPod owners

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP or 2000, 500MHz Pentium processor, 256MB RAM, 32MB disk space



iTunes' new video controls push the player in an interesting direction, but music is still its forte

REVIEW BUSINESS PLANNING SOFTWARE

PALO ALTO SOFTWARE

Business Plan Pro 2006

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £100 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Palo Alto 0845 351 9924

DETAILS www.paloalto.co.uk

Business Plan Pro is designed to help you run an efficient and effective business. It is aimed at everyone, from those who have some experience of running a business to absolute beginners who are setting up on their own for the first time.

As with previous versions, there are two ways to create a plan. The simplest is to use one of the 500 business plans included. These cover businesses ranging from sandwich shops to tanning salons and guide you through the process of creating a plan. You can lift entire sections from the template for use in your own plan or just use them as inspiration. A few are niche plans and US-oriented, though, so they are of little use in the UK.

The second method is to create a plan from scratch, which should appeal to those with more experience. This second method is also wizard-led, making it easy to follow.

The 2006 version helps you plan your financial future, whether you intend to sell your company, go public or simply expand. The software covers areas such as creating an effective exit strategy and looking into financial risks and contingencies. Another important feature is the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis, which lets you give your business a health check. This type of detailed examination can help you determine a more successful business strategy.

An improved plan review helps you avoid planning pitfalls and offers tips and advice on how to polish your plan to make it look even more professional. The table wizards have also been enhanced to make creating financial tables for a specific business easier.

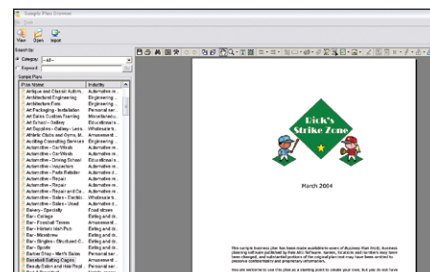
This is a thorough, well-thought out product, although the sample plans could have been better designed to help a wider audience.

Sam Ellis

✓ More financial planning options; SWOT analysis

✗ Some sample plans are niche and US-oriented

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Pentium processor, 100MB disk space. Part code PA0LPROG-K01



The wizard-based approach makes creating a business plan simple, even for novice users



REVIEW PHOTO MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

IVIEW MULTIMEDIA
MediaPro 3

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £120 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.iview-multimedia.com

Photographers have benefited enormously from the digital camera revolution. The ability to take as many photos as you like without the cost constraints of film is a great advantage. The unfortunate side effect of all this shutter action, though, is a mushrooming photo collection that needs to be kept in hand. MediaPro is a photo management utility that enables you to tag files with content information, making it easier to find the photo you want.

You can import photos straight from your camera, or simply point MediaPro at a folder that contains image files. Over 100 file formats are supported, including RAW files from Canon, Nikon and Kodak. It reads existing EXIF information, which you can supplement by adding information about the subject, location and occasion, plus a host of other details. You can also add details to multiple photos simultaneously, which speeds the task up.

There are a number of other tools on offer. By displaying up to four photos at the same time in full screen, the light box function allows you to compare similar photos quickly and accurately. This is an efficient way of eliminating badly composed or out-of-focus shots from a collection. An image editor is included for basic adjustments and corrections, but serious enthusiasts will prefer a dedicated photo-editing package. The useful slideshow creator can export a show in QuickTime movie format, and you can author a basic web gallery with just a few mouse clicks.

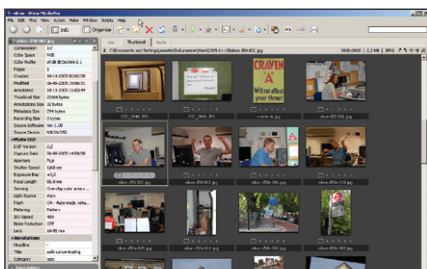
At £120 this is a very expensive application, though. Adobe's Photoshop Elements (see our *Hotlist* on page 58) is cheaper and comes with its own photo organiser, which does a similar job to Media Pro. As Photoshop Elements is also the best home-user photo editor on the market, MediaPro is just too expensive for home users. Still, professionals will find a lot here to like.

David McKinnon

✓ Great way to organise digital photographs

✗ Expensive for all but professionals

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP or 2000, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 30MB disk space. **Part code** B000BXFWP4



Don't let your digital photograph collection descend into chaos – take it in hand with MediaPro 3

REVIEW DTP SOFTWARE

SERIF
PagePlus 11

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £100 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Serif 0800 376 7070

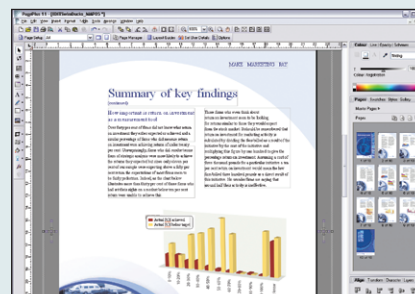
DETAILS www.serif.com

Serif's PagePlus desktop publishing software is a favourite of ours. Version 10 won a Best Buy award for home and small business use in our DTP round-up in *Shopper* November 2005. We felt it was excellent value compared with high-end products from Adobe and Quark. We also like the way Serif packs the software with user guides and templates to help even novices get professional results. This latest version costs the same as predecessor so we were keen to see what Serif had added to tempt us to upgrade.

The most useful new feature is the ability to import and edit PDFs directly. This is essential as PDF has become the most common way of sharing documents, so it will be welcomed by everyone who works with this type of file. Working with PDFs is like working with any other type of PagePlus document. You can open them, work on text and graphics and save your changes while retaining the formatting of the original document. Then you can share the results with others without the need for third-party PDF software.

If you import PDFs from other sources, you may face the issue of missing fonts. PagePlus resolves this by using automatic font substitution. It also offers you the option of remapping fonts manually at a later date with the Resource Manager. The Serif Font Map files store your preferred substitutions, which you can export for use with other PagePlus documents.

As well as being able to edit PDF documents from within PagePlus 11, you can now use the software to create and publish PDF forms. This means you can design your own membership or survey form and share it with others over email or the web. For extra security, forms can be certified by the author and signed by the recipient.



Import and edit PDF files directly within PagePlus 11

People who work with foreign language text have always been well supported by PagePlus; version 10 included Unicode support and the ability to design using foreign languages, special fonts and symbols. Version 11 expands on this, and can cope with multiple-language documents. It comes with 14 dictionaries, including German, French, Spanish and Italian. This means you can mark up parts of a document with a language and the spellchecker will automatically check them in the correct language.

Other areas that have been revamped in version 11 include image adjustments, which includes a new red-eye correction tool, and tables, as you can now use a database import wizard to upload information automatically from databases. Enhanced photo scrapbook pages allow you to turn your images into printed documents. A new user interface brings frequently used tools to your fingertips with the addition of dockable Studio tabs, offering single-click access to settings such as line, opacity and colour.

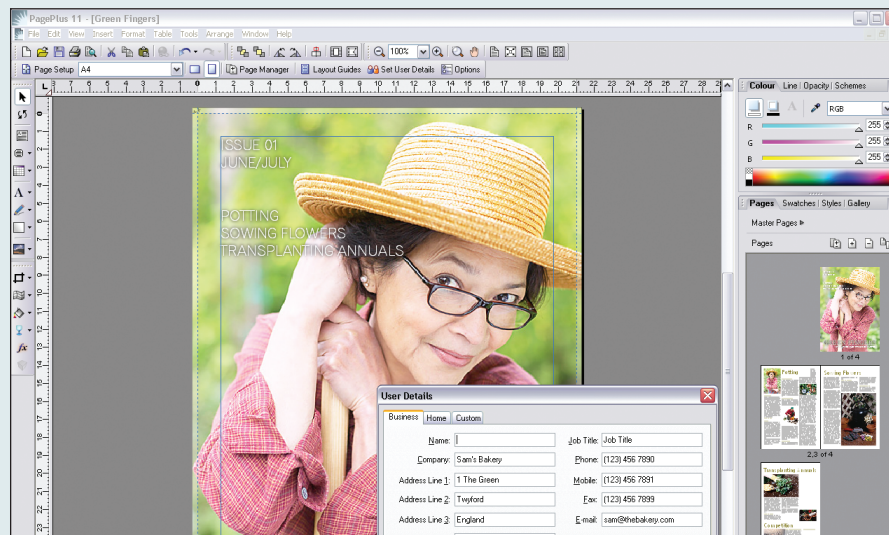
If you do a lot of PDF work, Serif PagePlus 11 is an excellent choice. However, owners of previous versions probably won't need to upgrade.

Sam Ellis

✓ PDF import feature; low cost

✗ Takes a while to master; tutorials aren't interactive

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 240MB disk space,



A wide range of professionally designed templates means that even beginners can make impressive documents with PagePlus 11, while PDF support allows users to distribute their work in the most widely accepted format